Remembering Kaifi Abba...

For poet-lyricist Kaifi Azmi the pen was a medium to voice his concern for society. A month after his demise, his cinematographer son Baba Azmi attempts to capture the enigma that was his father.

As we step into Baba Azmi's tastefully decorated apartment, an eerie stillness welcomes us. Baba's grief at losing his father is palpable, even as he tries to reconstruct the man behind the genius, the man who had touched the lives of his family so indelibly...

"My earliest memory of my dad is that he would never scold his children. I don't remember my father ever correcting me as a child. Instead, he would listen to what the six-year-old had to say thereby giving me independence of thought and mind. When I look at myself today, I consider myself blessed and lucky to have had him as my father. In fact, Abba would pinpoint our mistakes in a subtle manner. As a father he was not a strict disciplinarian but he has always guided us without ever imposing his views on us.

"Abba's greatness lay in his humble attitude towards people. I have never ever in my entire life heard him speak loudly to anyone. He was not the complaining kind. He never threw temper tantrums. For me my father was just like a hero, an ideal to whom I could look up to. He too must've had his share of sorrows in life but he didn't put his problems and grievances on display.

"Even when Abba was in hospital during the last 50 days, he didn't bother the doctors and nurses. The doctors were so surprised that he wouldn't even utter a word about his discomfort. When enquired about his health he would just nod his head and say 'I am first class.'

"Abba never used sickness as an excuse for not attending work. Once I remember, he had to attend a function. Unfortunately he caught a cold and was running a temperature. Yet Abba was determined to attend the

function and he did so. 'Let my illness do its work while I concentrate on my own', was his take!

"He was deeply involved with social upliftment and his native village stands testimony to this fact. He had suffered his first major stroke 30 years ago but he wasn't perturbed by his infirmity. Instead he focused his energy on improving conditions in his native village Nijwan in Azamgarh district of Uttar Pradesh. He worked tirelessly and in the end his hard work paid off. The village got its pin code and a railway station. Abba also opened a girls' school and set up a hospital. Gradually, roads were built and lines of communication were established. All this was possible due to Abba's painstaking efforts.

"Our household was not a 'filmi' one. It saw a mingling of great intellectuals and poets like Faiz Ahmed, Begum Akhtar, Madan Mohun and Ali Sardar Jafri, who were all Abba's contemporaries. There would be mehfils, attended by progressive writers. I grew up in this atmosphere thinking that these personalities were my relatives! You will be surprised to know that when we were young, we were not told to sleep early. Instead, we were encouraged to sit up late and listen to their shairies! It was really a fun time for us as we were granted full freedom in our home.

"This congenial environment helped in developing our personalities. Today, both Shabana and I are focused because our 'buniyad' is strong. The right values were inculcated in us from childhood and made us complete persons. Did my father have a favourite? Well, he didn't and even if he did, he didn't speak about it!

"Another interesting but unknown fact about my father is that he was totally spiritual. Yet religion was never an issue in our family even at the discussion level. Till I was 19 years old, I didn't know that I was a Muslim! This is because our family celebrated festivals like Holi and Diwali with the same gusto as any Hindu family. Even today, I look forward to Diwali and start planning ten days in advance.

"At the time Tanvi and I wanted to get married, her family had apprehensions as to how their daughter would adjust. But my father was very chilled out and was very supportive of my move. My father and mother too had a beautiful, romantic story. Interestingly, they remained friends throughout more than husband and wife. There was absolute equality between them and both had respect for each other. I feel really blessed to have them as my parents.

"Life in Mumbai had been a difficult one. We didn't live in a mahal or a haveli. When Abba left Nijwan and arrived in Mumbai, he started working for the Communist party. At that time his total earnings amounted to five to ten rupees. We lived in a commune where poet Ali Sardar Jafri was our immediate neighbour.

"My father wanted me to study but I didn't want to. He was very worried at that point as to what I would do in life. When I was in the fifth standard I was admitted to Hansraj Morarji boarding school, the annual fees for which were Rs.5000. It was a huge amount in those days but my father did everything he could to get me admitted – he contacted his friends, influenced people and somehow managed to collect the amount. I didn't like the school however and one day I ran away from there. I came home crying that I wouldn't go back to school because I didn't like the vegetarian food there! Shabana was just not ready to listen to my excuses and insisted that I should be sent back. I became even more firm in my demand saying that if I was sent back I would run away and wouldn't return home. I guess this got them scared! I could tell by my father's face that he was extremely hurt and upset but he didn't utter a word.

"Earlier I didn't want to do anything. When I finally became a cameraman Abba was happy. He would be very pleased when somebody praised my work. More so because I was the black sheep of the family and nobody thought anything substantial would come from me! Abba would advise me saying that no matter what happened, work should be the priority. Even today his piece of advice 'Zindagi mein kuech bhi karo, koi kaam bura nahin.' is my guiding principle.

"Today I feel I have inherited the kind of strength my father had. Thinking of it now I am amazed I didn't realise it earlier!"

Sushmita Biswas